

IMPRESSIONS AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE WINTER OF 2003

(This wonderful article by Al Ford first appeared in the May-June 1994 MRS Newsletter. The winter of 2003-2004 was nearly as bad as the one a decade earlier. Here is a slightly updated version of Al's insightful text.)

Normally, the winters in this part of the country are not too bad. Some snow in January and cold weather in February, but all in all, not so adverse. We will remember 2003 for a long time: beastly! 2003 was the wettest year in Maryland's recorded history. It followed on the heels of our driest year, 2002. The 2003 growing season was capped in September by destructive Hurricane Isabel and heavy, early snows. These climatic extremes have taken a toll on our homes and gardens. Here are some thoughts on picking up the pieces in 2004.

MULCHING

Knowing that every once in a while we have a bad winter, I always mulch around my roses. When I was new at this game I used twelve-inch wire fences held in place with bamboo sticks, which I grow in the back yard, then I would fill the fenced in area with oak leaves. I would even rake a neighbors yard for oak leaves if my yard didn't supply enough. Worked well too, very seldom did I lose a rose to winter kill. This project was such a time consuming effort, however, especially in the spring when all those leaves had to be removed and disposed of, that I thought of a better method, at least less time consuming. I reasoned that hardwood bark mulch would do the job as well, or almost as well, and I could dispense with the fencing and the arduous task of removing the soggy leaves in the spring. There was a bonus to the use of mulch also, I would be mulching in the spring anyway, and the material would be in the rose beds already. I wouldn't have to cart it in and spread it around.

I would pour hardwood bark mulch around each of the rose crowns and mound it around the lower part of the canes as high as I could get it without wasting the material. This method worked like a charm. What a time saver! Each fall, I would order three cubic yards of the mulch and would gleefully spread it around some 400 roses, hybrid teas, old garden roses, miniatures and seedlings alike. No problem. The mulch did change the pH of the soil somewhat by increasing the acidity from say 6.6 to 6.1, or so. Since I measure the pH and lime as required in the fall anyway this was no deterrent to the use of mulch as a winter protection.

Then came the fall of 1993 and the onset of the worst winter in history and because of a variety of other activities I didn't mulch at all! Didn't think seriously about it in fact until it was too late. But I reasoned that it wouldn't be too bad because the past two winters had been reasonable without a single loss of a rose and plenty of good canes to work with in the spring. Thoughts of disaster plagued me in January and February, the worst of which was images of being wiped out by spring. I even speculated on how many corpses I could remove and replace in the spring before complete exhaustion set in and I would be confined to bed or an institution. Finally I adopted the simplistic philosophy of "What will be, will be" and decided to await spring with a certain amount of dignity and aplomb despite the fact that more and more black canes were appearing.

SPRING'S AWAKENING

In March, the roses began to send up red shoots and basal breaks and each was a joy to behold. I was even more gratefully surprised when I began to prune the roses to discover life amongst the dead canes. Pruning had to be very hard this year to get down to good white pith. Some of the cuts, by necessity, were at or very close to the crown, whereas I generally like to leave the selected canes no lower than eight inches. This year, selection of canes was out of the question; any cane that survived was welcomed and some admittedly showed some brown in the cross-section of the cut. All split, discolored, darkened or black canes were removed and the remaining nubs were painted with Elmer's Carpenter's Glue.

MORTALITY

Generally, nearly all of the roses showed some sign of life, even though some were down to a few shoots or a few new basal breaks. This is not to say, they will thrive in the coming year and will not need replacing. Thus far the mortality of the big roses, hybrid teas, floribundas and grandifloras has been very low. 'Sweet Surrender', 'Canterbury', a Shrub rose, and 'Topaz Jewel', a Hybrid Rugosa, are the only ones known to have succumbed to the winter's fury. 'Canterbury' was a year-old cutting of a Shrub purchased a number of years ago. The original grafted plant expired the winter of 1993, even though it had been mulched. This rose should be considered "tender" although I intend to replace it anyway because of its special form and beauty. The demise of 'Topaz Jewel' surprised me because all the other Rugosa and Hybrid Rugosas came through the winter with flying colors. All other heritage and old garden roses in our garden did very well indeed.

The question arises naturally as to the reason for such relatively good winter performance of the big roses despite the absence of winter protection over the course of such a beastly winter. There are a number of reasons that occur to me. First, all the roses entered last winter in good condition, having been well fed during the year and were also relatively free of blackspot, mildew or other disease. A healthy rose has a better chance of winter survival than one in relatively poor health. Second, snow occurred and was followed by freezing rain and ice formation prior to the cold blowing winds. The snow and ice offered a kind of protection to the crowns of the roses.

It is known that snow is an effective insulation for roses, but, of course, it cannot be counted on. There were relatively few days of cold blowing wind that occurred at a time when the crowns of the roses were not protected by snow and or ice. The greatest danger to roses, it is generally agreed, is when the crown is exposed to very cold temperatures and a cold drying wind is blowing fiercely. A third reason, I believe, is that I have a tendency to plant roses with the crown a little below the surface rather than trying to keep the crown at ground level or slightly above. A number of rosarians in this area have independently arrived at the conclusion that the crown should be placed somewhat below the surface. Fourth, there was ample mulch in the rose beds although not piled around the roses. This mulch offered some minor protection and in some cases blowing leaves had accumulated in the rose beds. I don't think I'll count on this in the future, however.

There were many successes of the big roses over the winter, and some I didn't expect. For example, 'Brandy', 'First Prize' and 'Ore gold' -- each considered "tender"--

all survived, but required very hard spring pruning. Each is trying to make a valiant return. Roses like 'Eyepaint', 'Fimbriata' (HRg), 'Hannah Gordon', 'Escapade', 'Impatient', 'Stretch Johnson', 'Matangi', 'Orangeaid', 'Graham Thomas' and many others Floribundas and Hybrid Teas and the old garden roses seem to regard the worse winter in history as "...a piece of cake." 'Oskar Cordell', my only hybrid perpetual, survived beautifully too.

MINIATURES

Proportionately, I lost more miniatures than big roses which was unsuspected. Most of minis that were lost seemed to have been heaved to the surface of the ground by thawing of the soil. In a few cases, part of the root system could be seen. The lost miniatures were 'Loving Touch', 'Arizona Sunset', 'Anytime', 'Georgette', 'Mary Bell', 'Cornsilk', 'Figurine'(2) and 'Old Glory'(2). It is of interest that I had multiple plants of the first three and lost only one of each. This point emphasizes that location of the plant has something to do with the surviving potential of the variety.

SPRING TREATMENT OF SURVIVORS

Assuming that you have already pruned out all blackened and discolored canes and have cut back into seemingly live tissue to good white pith, continue to observe the plants and remove any further significant dieback. If you have not done so already, remove all pruned material and leaves from last year that probably harbor disease. Use your regular spring feeding program even on those plants you may have some doubt about. Water the spring fertilizer in well and maintain a water rate of at least an inch or better per week. Start your spraying program as soon as the plants have started to leaf out and follow it rigorously. The idea is to give your plants the best sendoff possible for the new growing season.

Some writers have warned that following a hard winter the first growth may be from the understock, especially if the canes have been pruned hard. Sucker growth probability is increased if the grafted variety has suffered significant stress over the winter. Wait on this new growth, don't respond too quickly. Be certain it is different than last year's normal foliage before you take action to remove it, even though the growth seems to be coming from below the crown. By the same token, once you are convinced you are dealing with understock growth dig down to its origin and pull it out. In cases where such growth is the only growth, you will have to decide if you wish to care for R. canina, R. multiflora or some other understock.

Should you have any specific questions about your rose garden, as usual, please feel free to call any of the Consulting Rosarians listed on the back cover of the MRS Newsletter. If you would like to share with other readers your experience during the aftermath of the terrible 2002-2003 period, please drop us a line. Which of your roses fared well over the winter and which did you lose.? Did you winter protect your roses? If so, what material did you use?

-Al Ford, 1994

Warm-weather months and rose season approaching so here is seasonal treat that takes advantage of both:

ROSE and PISTACHIO ICE-CREAM

2 cups scented rose petals
1 1/2 cups (10 fl oz) light single cream
1/2 cup (2 oz) sifted confectioner's sugar
2 tbsp rosewater 1/2 cup (2 oz) pistachio nuts, shelled and coarsely chopped

Remove the yellow bases of the petals. Place them in a pan together with the cream and sugar and bring slowly to a boil. Strain the cream mixture, taking care to extract as much liquid as possible from the petals. Incorporate the rosewater and leave to cool. Pour into a freezer-proof container, cover and freeze for at least an hour, together with an empty bowl. Beat the mixture in the bowl, return to the container and freeze for a further three hours. Transfer to the refrigerator for 30 minutes before serving.

(adapted from the MARCH-APRIL, 1994 MRS Newsletter)

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